

Promising Practice: Academic Advisor/Student Retention Specialist Model

Edmonds Community College

Creating Access to Careers in Healthcare (CATCH)

Creating Access to Careers in Healthcare (CATCH) is Edmonds Community College's Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program, funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance. A key element of this program's wraparound support team is its academic advisor/student retention specialist position. This is a relationship-based, student-centered model in which a student shares in the responsibility of advising and makes his or her own decisions to chart a path for personal growth. The professional student support relationship bridges faculty academic advising, classroom support, and the student's vision of personal development and life goals.

The CATCH program's wraparound support includes intensive interventions to respond to the many barriers that its students face. The program's navigators respond to social and financial barriers with ready referrals and follow-up with its community partners for events such as loss of home, unexpected changes in income, or family relationship problems. CATCH college success, computer literacy, and employment soft-skill instructors work with the allied health instructors to build new skills and identify tutoring or other interventions that may be needed. Along with the academic advisor, this team communicates through a Google Docs spreadsheet and weekly meetings to provide an early alert network tracking student progress.

One critical barrier for many students is their inability to see themselves being successful in life. The CATCH healthcare foundation core curriculum, with its stackable certificates and career pathway approach, provides a roadmap of clear individual steps to achieve a living wage and a future career. But self-sufficiency requires more than a clear path. Histories of past abuse or failures, along with negative social attitudes, are difficult to overcome. Students often have personal developmental barriers that may show up as "giving up," family discouragement, or even self-defeating intentional failure.

The developmental academic advising model CATCH employs uses the academic advisor/student retention specialist in a teaching function that is concerned not only with facilitating course or vocational decisions but also with encouraging students' development of rational processes, behavioral awareness, problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills. The goal is to assist students to develop and recognize their growing competence, autonomy, and purpose. Developmental advising is a process that is continuous and cumulative in building a relationship with the student. It requires establishment of caring, trusting interactions with the advisor.

Nora Faram, MSW, MHP, LSWAIC, is the academic advisor/student retention specialist for CATCH. She has provided some examples of how she works with students in this role.

About the time a CATCH student cohort completes the initial college success skill course, Nora meets with each student in an introductory interview to begin the student engagement plan that outlines that student's goals and dreams for their future. She uses this time to start building the relationship and trust and assesses the student's skill level in critical thinking and decision making. With continued conversation, and in using crisis assistance and referrals, she teaches problem solving. Nora is often the first confidante of a student in trouble.

One student with excellent grades declared she wanted to quit the program. Being a recent immigrant, she was greatly stressed over several factors in her household. She, her husband, and her infant daughter had several other family members staying in their house, and, with her husband's \$10/hour job being the only income, she felt tremendous financial stress. On top of this worry, noise, and distraction, she found the cultural changes in adapting to American society created additional conflicts in expectations and family roles. She said that at times she felt split between two worlds. Along with other supports, Nora helped her explore her thinking, reflecting on her strengths and the benefits of staying with the program. The student decided to keep going and completed the program. During a CATCH recognition event this student received a special perseverance award that was presented by the college president. As her patient care skills increased so did her outlook. She earned her Nursing Assistant license and Phlebotomy Technician certificate, qualifying to sit for the American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP) phlebotomy exam. She was hired by her phlebotomy externship site and continued her education, earning her Clinical Lab Assistant certificate with a goal of a Bachelor's degree in Medical Technology. She is now in a lead role in her lab and makes about \$18/hour.

Nora also helps to arrange recognition events that are specific and timely to help students see the success of others and celebrate their own successes. As students in one recent cohort neared the end of their first college success course, the instructor talked with Nora about their success. Of 19 students in the cohort, 15 had perfect attendance, and all had activated their campus email the first week and made fast progress in their computer literacy lessons. Awards for perfect attendance and a simple celebration were part of the last day of class. The students were surprised, excited, and proud of themselves. One student commented, "Let's keep this up and continue the good work."

Promising Practice: Using Students' Success Stories to Build Community Engagement Creating Access to Careers in Healthcare (CATCH) Program

John House had a vision of what could be possible in helping low-income TANF students overcome tremendous odds and break countless barriers if Edmonds and Everett Community Colleges' faculty and administrators could work in partnership with like-minded people from the Department of Social Health Services, Employment Security Department, Workforce Development Council, TRAC Associates, Housing Hope, Snohomish County Refugee and Immigrant Services, Washington State Apprenticeship and Training Council, Washington Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, and Business Access, a company that specializes in building in-home learning communities. Low-income TANF students would have the academic training they needed to secure good jobs and appropriate wraparound services while they were in school to enable them to stay there.

This HPOG program director created a plan to help students to succeed by providing excellent training through dedicated faculty and digital technology tools, but also planned to capture the energy, excitement, and pure joy in the faces and the hearts of students who were able to succeed and use their healthcare training to move from poverty to a living wage, from TANF to "a job, a better job, and a better life." From the beginning, John and his colleagues fostered a story-sharing culture by listening carefully to students and partners, eventually hiring an independent firm to conduct in-depth ethnographic interviews that would help them gather compelling stories and anecdotes to continuously improve the program.

The plan was strategic. Shared anecdotes and stories were balanced with hard data to engage college leaders in the fledgling program. CATCH strategies were tied to broader initiatives underway at the college, such as Achieving the Dream (AtD), dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree. There was a conscious effort to build a community of support throughout the college so the senior leadership would hear about the success stories of the HPOG program not only from its director, but also from others.

John convened multiple meetings with faculty and administrators from across Edmonds and Everett Colleges as well as professional staff from state and local organizations and businesses that cared about student success and were willing to contribute time and effort to it. During these meetings, which continue today, participants are asked to roll up their sleeves and work on ways to make a difference in the students' lives. Whether the plan is mentoring, acting as preceptors, or serving as a sounding board, these groups focus on new ideas, new ways of reaching students, and new plans for the colleges.

Whenever John meets with any potential partners, from inside or outside the college, he brings success stories to influence social change, engage partners, and foster the adoption of new ideas and strategies. Undaunted as many attempts to set up meetings fell through, he persisted, and he always made the case by relating the personal stories of students. Everyone he spoke with was touched. After all, who would not be excited and impressed when a low-income, immigrant family moves from living in their car to affordable housing in a nice neighborhood because the mother has graduated from the CATCH program and is able to help support her family in a way she always dreamed?

To build a story-sharing culture requires the following steps:

1. Begin by doing an excellent job for your students. By helping them to succeed and capturing their stories along the way, you can bring in new partners who want to be a part of building something important in their communities.
2. Listen to those impacted by your work to help build a story-sharing culture. Students are busy, staff are busy, and programs are designed to move the unemployed to work and advancement rapidly, but in this fast-paced environment, listening with the goal of engagement both fosters trust and reveals students' experiences and qualities faster. CATCH uses 16 phrases and questions to facilitate engagement and story sharing.
3. Identify shared interests, of which the most powerful is *student success*. Despite differences, most staff and partners agree that student success *is* the priority. Using compelling student stories and anecdotes can foster trust across a wide range of partners.
4. When students display the attributes that will help make them succeed in the program, reward them, sometimes on the spot. If CATCH students work hard and help their classmates, they may be invited to a special reception to receive a certificate from the college president and CATCH staff. If students in the clinical or lab setting show reliability, dependability, timeliness, and professional demeanor, they may be rewarded with a free lunch. If they earn excellent grades throughout their college experience, they may be asked to be a keynote speaker at graduation.
5. Deliberately capture everyone's story and put many stories on the program website in a very engaging way, with the students' pictures.

As Edmonds Community College faculty increasingly meet CATCH students in class, many are amazed at the level of digital literacy, the manner, and the professional attitude displayed by these students, who are very serious about getting a job. The reality of faculty and administrators' experience with the students trumps their expectations. This year the college president asked a student from the CATCH program to address a college-wide convocation ceremony, and she did an excellent job.

John involves CATCH students representing various points within the program to participate in community and college partner meetings. He creates panels of students to share their classroom, lab, externship, and new job experiences, always meeting with the student speakers in advance to walk through the questions and discuss the audience. It's often a great learning opportunity for students!